

Integrating Grammar into the Teaching of Paragraph-Level Composition

By Nurdan Özbek

Some of you wish to be writers, some of you wish to be correspondents, some of you wish to be translators, while others wish to be teachers. No matter what career you choose, the ability to write is a necessity in life.

Luo 1989:26

In his definition of writing, Bryne (1979) states that writing is transforming our thoughts into language. It is a very complex skill that requires both physical and mental activity on the part of the writer. According to Walters (1983:17) "writing is the last and perhaps most difficult skill students learn-if they ever do." Bryne expresses the same thing, arguing that writing is not easy nor spontaneous; it requires conscious mental effort. He divides the problems that make writing difficult into three categories. The first, he calls psychological, caused by lack of interaction and feedback between the reader and the writer. The second category consists of linguistic problems. Bryne states that in speech, grammar mistakes can be tolerated because of the spontaneous nature of the medium which prevents us from fully monitoring what we are saying-in particular, our sentence construction and the inter-connection of our sentences. In writing, on the other hand, we have to express ourselves in a clearer and more grammatical manner in order to compensate for the absence of certain features of spoken language, such as body language, prosodic features, and immediate feedback between the interlocutors. The third category consists of cognitive problems. Unlike speech, writing has to be taught through formal instruction. The organization framework for our ideas in written communication has to be mastered.

All these difficulties make learning to write a sophisticated process that combines many interrelated components. Raimes (1983) categorizes these components as content, organization, grammar, syntax, mechanics, word choice, purpose, audience and the writer's process. The interrelatedness of these components in writing can be seen in figure 1 below by Raimes (1983:6).

These features of writing cause problems even for native speakers when they write text. If writing is such a complex skill requiring formal instruction and conscious mental effort for native speakers, it will be even more difficult for the EFL learner.

In addition to these difficulties in learning how to write, there is a specific point that is of great importance in designing a new writing course for our students. Since our students will be teachers of English, they not only have to learn how to write effectively; they also have to learn how to teach this skill to others. Therefore, in our case, the difficulty of teaching writing stems from the following three factors:

1. The difficult nature of the writing skill itself.
2. The difficulty of teaching writing to foreign-language learners.
3. The difficulty of teaching writing to prospective teachers of English.

Needs Analysis

In order to identify the problems that students and teachers have in composition courses as well as their needs and expectations, a questionnaire for students and a structured interview for instructors were prepared. The questionnaire was given to 52 students, who have taken composition courses during their first year in the Department of Foreign Language Teaching at the Middle East Technical University. It consisted of 15 questions which aimed at defining problematic areas in the first-year composition courses and eliciting student opinions for improving their grammar and composition courses.

A structured interview was given to nine instructors who presently teach composition or who have taught composition before in the department. In the first section, instructors are asked to provide reasons for their students' inability to use grammar effectively in their writing and to make suggestions for overcoming this problem. In the final section, instructors are asked to mark three samples of paragraphs written by first-year students. The first was poorly organized but without grammatical error; the second sample contained many errors but the ideas were logically organized and supportive of the topic sentence; and the third had both grammatical and organization errors. Our objective in this portion of the research was to determine how instructors are affected by grammar errors when marking students' papers.

According to the results of the student questionnaire, the problems with the composition courses stemmed from different reasons: the textbook; the difficult nature of the writing skill itself; the method of teaching, etc. As for the open-ended question eliciting the students' ideas for improving the grammar and composition courses, students suggested a textbook change and recommended that they have more opportunity to write in their composition courses. A sampling of their responses follows:

We should write more in composition courses.

If certain expressions, phrases or sentence patterns are taught before-hand in our composition courses, it would be easier for us to construct better paragraphs.

Writing topics should be about daily events, human relations, social conventions, problems of foreign-language learners, etc.

Writing topics should not be limited. We should be given a number of topics so that everyone can write about something that interests him/her.

The structured interview session with the instructors yielded the following views:

Grammar should be a part of an integrated course with emphasis on writing.

Students' problems with grammar stem from the way they are taught. They should be given more opportunity to apply the structures they have learned to different situations.

When students are involved in grammar exercises, they focus on a certain grammatical problem and may get the impression they have mastered it. However, in writing compositions, their attention is also focused on ideas, and organizational skills. Grammar lessons should be done on a textual discourse level.

Instructors were asked to give the percentages they assign to the elements of grammar, organization, vocabulary, spelling, and punctuation when marking students' compositions. The results are shown in table 1 below.

The percentages in table 1 indicate that organization is given only slightly more weight than grammar in determining the total score.

As for the grading of student writing in the second part of the survey, teacher performance was found to contradict this weighting scale. For each of the paragraphs graded on a potential score of 100, the average grades were as follows:

Paragraph one -59%

Paragraph two -51%

Paragraph three -45%

A broad range of grades was given by the different instructors as is shown in table 2 below.

These results indicate that when it comes to grading, instructors are negatively affected by grammar errors (as in the case of the second paragraph) no matter how good the organization of the paragraph may be. For the first paragraph, the situation is just the opposite-it is not clear what the student is trying to say as he jumps from one idea to the other without following a logical sequence. However, this paragraph has received the highest grade possibly because the student has not made any grammar mistakes. As for the last paragraph, as expected it was given a much lower grade since the student made mistakes in both grammar and organization.

Implications of the Needs Analysis for Course Design

Having analyzed the results of the questionnaire and the structured interview, we have seen that our students will benefit from a writing course that integrates grammar into the teaching of paragraph level composition. We have the following justifications in doing so:

1. Grammar is the first prerequisite for effective writing. Our students have difficulty in expressing their ideas while writing compositions as they do not have an adequate command of English grammar. In some cases, the grammar mistakes may not be "detrimental to the comprehension of the composition" as some of the instructors have stated, yet they cannot be tolerated since our students will be teachers of English.
2. Our students are unable to make use of their knowledge of grammar in composition courses because they are taught grammar in isolation and do not have the opportunity to make use of what they have learned in real communication. If grammar and composition teaching are simultaneously carried out, students will be provided with a meaningful context in which they can practice the grammar structures they have just been taught.
3. Integrative teaching of grammar and composition will allow teachers to do remedial teaching since the syllabus of the composition course will be spiral; teachers will be able to dwell on certain grammar points a second or third time as they appear in students' compositions.
4. From the motivation point of view, students will be gratified to see that they can make use of their knowledge of grammar in their compositions. This will provide them with a context for practicing what they have been taught.

Integrated Teaching of Grammar and Composition

The integration of grammar teaching with composition allows for grammatical structures to be taught in the context of particular methods of development for different topics. Raimes (1981:5) describes this the following way:

Certain methods of development require certain structures, e.g., a comparison-contrast task will make the use of comparative and superlative forms necessary, likewise in chronological narration, past tenses and in spatial order, prepositions of place will be used.

Thus, an assigned topic may require a certain method of development and this method of development will require the use of certain patterns. Students should be guided into using those patterns that are to be practised.

Similarly, Marquez (1981) states that paragraph structure and development should be simultaneously taught at every stage of the teaching and learning process. For instance, she states that as descriptive paragraphs tell about a person, place or thing, they generally make use of *be* sentences. Along with *be* she adds, a few other verbs like *seem*, *appear*, *look*, *sound*, *smell*, *taste*, and *feel* may be used. Similarly, the narrative paragraph uses mostly action verbs. According to Marquez (1981:17), such integration will give the following advantages:

Specific grammatical structures lend themselves to certain types of development, and these ought to be exploited to full advantage. Development by comparison and contrast, for instance, lends itself to the teaching of, *-er/more than*, *-est/most*, *as . . . as*, *such as that*, *so + adjective + that*, etc. Spatial development is a good place to teach troublesome prepositions and adverbs of place, just as chronological development is a good section in which to teach adverbs of time, both single forms and prepositional phrases. . . . An important characteristic of the teaching of selected paragraph structures is that it is inseparable from the teaching of specific grammatical structures, and practice in one should not proceed without conscious awareness of the other.

Let us have a look at the grammar points and the paragraph types that we found relevant to teach simultaneously after analyzing the first-year grammar and composition courses:

I. The Descriptive Paragraph

a. description of a place grammar points:

- adverbs of place (prepositions)
- there is/there are; have and have got
- simple present tense
- definite and indefinite articles

b. description of a person (physical appearance/general impression)

grammar points (shared with descriptions of place):

- adjectives, character adjectives and nouns
- adjectives with -ing and -ed
- the sequencing of adjectives
- adjectival clauses (who, which, that) and reduced clauses
- look + like / as if / as though
- seem + present / past / continuous + infinitive

II. The Narrative Paragraph

a. present narration *grammar points*:

- adverbials of time and sequence (by, at, after, before, during, first, next, second, then, last, finally, etc .)
- adverbs of frequency (always, usually, seldom, often, etc .)
- adverbial clauses of time (before, after, until, etc .)
- simple present vs. present continuous

b. past narration *grammar points*:

- adverbial clauses of time (in past) and gerund constructions
- simple past, past progressive, past perfect, past perfect continuous tenses, simple past vs. past perfect
- still, yet, since, for
- non-defining relative clauses (used in narration while setting a scene)

III. The Expository Paragraph

grammar points:

transitional words and *phrases* (another example of . . . , for instance, to exemplify, to illustrate, etc .)

IV. The Comparison and Contrast Paragraph

grammar points:

- transitional devices for comparison and contrast: (both . . . and . . . , either . . . or . . . , neither . . . nor . . . , the same as . . . , like . . . , unlike . . . , different from, a is x times as . . . as b, [slightly] more . . . than . . . , as . . . as, etc.
- comparison with different tenses.

V. The Classification Paragraph

grammar points:

- transitions to give categories, similarities, differences, examples, certain categories
- correlative conjunctions (both . . . and . . . , either . . . or . . .)
- articles (definite, indefinite, deletion)

VI. The Process-Analysis Paragraph

grammar points:

- imperatives
- passive vs. active voice (including "it is said that," "he is said to . . . ," "it is supposed to . . . ")
- modals (should, might, must, can)
- infinitives of purpose
- adverbial clauses of purpose (e.g., so that)
- adverbial clauses of time and sequence (before, after, gerund constructions, first, next, etc.)
- conditionals (type 1)

VII. The Cause-and-Effect Paragraph

grammar points:

- conditionals (all types), wish clauses (unless, when, etc.)
- transitions and expressions for cause and effect (because of . . . , as a result of . . . , x results from . . . , x is caused by . . . , the reason for . . . , therefore, consequently, for this reason, although, even though, in spite of, despite, as long as, provided that, providing that, so that . . . , in case . . .)
- modals and modal + perfect
- adverbial clauses of cause (because, as, since)

- adverbial clauses of result (so + adverb that . . . so + few/many + plural nouns that. . .)

VIII. The Argumentative Paragraph

grammar points:

- subjunctive noun clauses (e.g., recommend that . . . , advise, request, suggest, etc.)
- transitional words and phrases (first, second, next, after, last, for example, for instance, to illustrate, in addition, also, besides that, moreover, furthermore, in conclusion, finally. . .)

Conclusion

This study strengthens our belief that integrative teaching of grammar and composition will increase student motivation and improve performance in writing. This integration can be done in two different ways: composition and grammar can be reduced to only one course in which the teaching of grammar and composition is carried out simultaneously; or students may take two different courses-"grammar" and "composition"-with the integrated model being applied in composition courses. The results of the questionnaire and the structured interview indicated that our students would benefit more from the former.

This model may be a viable alternative for other universities addressing the EFL needs of their students.

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figure 1

Clear, Fluent, and Effective Communication of Ideas

- GRAMMAR - rules of verbs, agreement, articles, pronouns, etc.
- MECHANICS - handwriting, spelling, punctuation, etc.
- ORGANIZATION - paragraphs, topics and support, cohesion and unity
- WORD CHOICE - vocabulary, idiom, tone
- PURPOSE - the reason for writing
- AUDIENCE - the reader(s)
- THE WRITER'S PROCESS - getting ideas, getting started, writing drafts, revisiting
- CONTENT - relevance, clarity, originality, logic, etc.

table 1

Table 1: Percentages given to the elements of composition by the Instructors interviewed.

Elements of Composition	Number of Instructors	Percentages Given
Grammar	3	40%
	2	30%
	3	20%
Organization	2	40%
	5	30%
	1	20%

Vocabulary	1	30%
	6	20%
	1	10%
Spelling and Punctuation	7	10%
	1	20%

table 2

Table 2: List of grades given to the paragraphs in the structured interview.

Paragraph I	Paragraph II	Paragraph III
40	30	30
50	30	30
50	45	40
60	45	40
60	50	40
65	50	45
65	60	50
70	70	60
70	80	65